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ABSTRACT

Adults may seek out learning at different times in their lives, for different reasons, and for vastly different purposes. Some of the reasons are to achieve pre-determined goals; to fill education gaps; to explore options and make choices; to develop personally; to perform a job or role better; or to enhance employment prospects. Learning itself is not always about gaining skills and knowledge, but can be described as changes in knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, and behaviors. These three conditions must be present for learning in adults to occur: raw data and experiences; time and freedom from threat; and sufficient prior meaning or perspectives to handle new information. "Learning to learn" describes a process in which a learner's independence and autonomy in learning increases over time. Learning to learn strategies help adult learners to improve generic skills; undertake self-directed learning; select and use resources effectively; engage in critical and reflective practice; communicate and collaborate with greater confidence; and organize their learning. There are four different types of adult learners: active, reflective, theorizing, and experiential. The role of voluntary participation in creating motivation for learning is important. (Conditions of learning for adults and implications for teaching are summarized. Includes 12 references.) (MO)

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ARIS INFORMATION SHEET
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ADULT LEARNING

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Adult learning

There is no such thing as a typical adult learner. Adults may seek out learning at different times in their lives, for different reasons, and for vastly different purposes:

- to achieve a pre-determined goal
- to fill a gap in education
- to explore options and make choices
- for personal development, family, social or community reasons
- to perform a specific role or job better
- to enhance their employment prospects
- for the fun of it.

What is learning?

Learning is not always about gaining skills and knowledge. Research has broadened understandings to show that learning:

- is a voluntary, and active process
- is individual
- is an internal process
- has intrinsic value as a process, itself.

Learning can be described as changes in knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and behaviour.

When does learning take place?

Many of an adults' most important and life-changing learning experiences occur beyond their formal educational experiences. It is important then to make the distinction between 'learning' and 'education'.

Three conditions are required for learning to occur:

- raw data and experiences required
- time and freedom from threat
- sufficient prior meaning or perspectives to handle new information.

Learning results in relatively permanent changes not only in meaning and behaviours but also in the ways one goes about making meaning, thinking, making choices, acting and ultimately making sense. (MacKeracher, 1996:6)

Learning to learn

Learning to learn is a term increasingly used to describe a process whereby a learner's independence and autonomy in learning increases over time. Effective adult learning programs develop the 'learning to learn' strategies of the participants, enabling learners to consider the

processes of effective learning in addition to the **content**.

Learning to learn strategies help the adult learner to:

- improve their generic skills
- undertake self directed learning
- selection and use of resources effectively
- engage in critical and reflective practice
- communicate through networking and collaboration with greater confidence
- organisation their learning better.

Teacher/trainers in adult education programs must recognise and accommodate the reciprocal relationship(s) between teaching and learning:

*Teaching is concerned with the promotion of learning, and we therefore need to understand what it is we are promoting. In particular, part of our task is to help our adult participants **'learn how to learn'**, or rather to learn how to learn more effectively.* (Rogers, 1996)

CONDITIONS OF LEARNING FOR ADULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

CONDITIONS OF ADULT LEARNING	IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING
Learning is a basic human activity and need	Teaching is not essential to learning but may facilitate it
Learning is motivated when there is incongruence of lack of harmony between individual's experience and their perception of the world	Teachers and learners need to structure the process of learning together so that it may be relevant to the experience or problem that created the felt need to learn
Learners need to feel treated as adults	Teachers must not regard themselves as the fount of all knowledge but engage learning between participants
Individual needs are brought to learning situations	Learning should be as individualised as possible and students should be helped to become aware of the relevance of the material to their needs
Learners bring their own experiences and meaning systems to the learning situation	Teachers must use these experiences as learning resources and build on the meaning system(s)
People learn best when their sense of self is not threatened	An ethos of respect and non threatening environment. Cooperation rather than competition
Learning occurs at different rates of speed	Self paced learning should be encouraged and accounted for
Diversity of learning styles, methods and personality traits exist	These styles be recognised and accommodated
Learners bring their own self esteem and self perception and degrees of confidence to the learning context	Empathy and sensitivity required to create a successful learning outcome for all

*Adapted from Burns R. 1995 **The Adult Learner at Work** Business and Professional Publishing, NSW*

Learning styles

Individuals rarely fit neatly into any one category or classified type. Nevertheless, it may be useful to consider ways in which adult learners may approach or handle a learning episode at a particular point in time.

The active learner: independent, often adopting forms of 'trial and error', receptive to new ideas and experiences, often prepared to propose solutions that may not always be fully formed.

The reflective learner: more cautious, often building on the observation of, and sharing opinions with others -taking time to build a broader picture.

The theorising learner: builds up systems or principles of knowledge - work through problems step by step, attaching the unknown to the known, following logical steps - prefers the 'cut and dried', not positive about diverse opinions.

The experiential learner: like to do for themselves, find shortcuts and become frustrated with too much instruction without opportunity for action.

Motivation and learning

Motivation, at least as far as education and training are concerned, can be considered as one of those factors that generate and direct goal-oriented behaviours. Motivation is often perceived as a driving force that compels an adult learner to act in certain ways.

The initial motivation may not carry the adult learner all the way through a devised learning program, educators need to consider new ways of regenerating motivation - incentives, recognition and rewards may at times be helpful. Certainly learner success and satisfaction reinforce learning and motivate further learning.

Voluntary participants in adult education are much more likely to be positively motivated, and participants are more likely to be positively motivated if learning is without perceived threat, (eg. work status, loss of esteem, lack of success) and when the content is centred on learner need. In identifying learning goals and needs, adult learners should be given encouragement and time to identify and set their goals and be assured they have opportunity to clarify and communicate those goals.

Further reading and references

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